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## Symbol of Undetermined Faith. A Note on Aleksej Kručënyx's Vowel Poem "Heights"

With his gift for Futurist flamboyance and modernist shock, Aleksej Kručënyx produced playful and highly enigmatic poetry that has attracted and bedeviled readers and critics for over a century. Our observations in this article focus on Kručënyx's vowel poem "Высоты: вселенский язык" (Heights: universal language)<sup>1</sup>. The poem features the stylistic earmarks of the Cubo-Futurist linguistic universe and as such constitutes a concise manifesto of the Cubo-Futurist, expressed ironically as an anti-symbolist creed. First appearing in the fall of 1913 in the collection *Дожлая луна*<sup>2</sup>, "Heights" is an affirmation of Kručënyx's assertion that vowels, unlike consonants, represent a universal expression of "idea" independent of the bounds of conventional words. Yet, unlike the poet's more frequently cited pieces such as "дыр бул щыл" and far from representing a simple concatenation of phonemes written with indeterminate exuberance, this poem presents a statement as universal in scope and consequence as Kručënyx's own prose manifestos<sup>3</sup>.

From its first appearance "Высоты" was assumed to be a self-conscious expression of the author's own belief in the supremacy of vowels in the phonemic universe. Kručënyx firmly held that it was time for poetry to move into a radically different arena and be liberated from the tyranny of the word, *i.e.* the word needed to become completely autonomous of the meaning. Key to attaining this liberation was what Kručënyx saw as the indeterminate but universal nature of the vowels. Since vowels come unencumbered with specific lexical charge, it is the prerogative and responsibility of the reader to determine any "meaning" that the vowels might impose on the poem:

<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this material was presented at the *NEMLA* Conference in Boston, USA on 26 February 2009. I would like to express my gratitude to those who have commented on this article and in particular to Dr. Karen Rosenflanz who provided valuable and insightful comments on early versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Kručënyx edited and contributed to this work of the Helacia group along with various other Futurist writers. A second edition appeared in 1914.

<sup>3</sup> Kručënyx was renowned of course for his contributions to the manifesto genre in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, writing or contributing to such avant-garde pieces as *Поощения общего искусства* (1912), *Слово как таковое* (1913), *Декларация слова как такового* (1913), among others.

...Согласные дают быт, национальность, тяжесть, гласные – обратное – ВСЕ-ЛЕНСКИЙ ЯЗЫК. Стихотворение из одних гласных:

о е а  
и е и  
а е ё

(Markov 1967: 63)<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the very indeterminateness of the vowels makes the poem “universal” in the sense that it can be freely interpreted by anyone regardless of linguistic abilities. National or linguistic borders are thus broken and a universality of free and open interpretability is attained<sup>5</sup>.

There was, predictably, swift and high skepticism in conservative literary circles about the “universality” of any vowel poem. Almost immediately after the publication of “Высоты,” Valerij Brjusov, unimpressed with the possibilities of indeterminate meaning in poetry, wrote a scalding criticism of Kručenyx’s work. In his imagined “Диалог о футуризме,” the elder symbolist poet asserted that Kručenyx’s poem, an especially enigmatic specimen of Futurist poetry, offered *no* meaning precisely because it offered only the *possibility* of meaning derived inevitably from the individual interpretations of its reading and performance. Brjusov’s “Futurist” begins with a defense:

*Футурист* (несколько непоследовательно). – А что же, если и буквы! Разве из букв нельзя создать поэзии? В последнем счете, слова, конечно, – буквы, и если поэзия – искусство слов, то она и искусство букв! Вот изумительные стихи одного из футуристов... [reads “Высоты.”] Это стихотворение одинаково много скажет каждому читателю, кем бы он ни был, образованным или не образованным, русским или китайцем, – стихотворение истинно вселенского языка!

*Символист*. – Простите, пожалуйста. Позвольте, разобраться это стихотворение, – господина Крученых, если не ошибаюсь. Чем же оно что-нибудь скажет читателю? Если формой букв, то согласитесь, это будет уже не поэзия, а графика или живопись. Если сокровенным значением гласных, которое вы, по-видимому, предполагаете, то имейте в виду, что в каждом языке гласные произносятся по-разному. Немец иначе произносит е, чем француз, тем более чем русский; итальянец никогда не произнесет нашего и, и т. д. Если, наконец, звуками, при

<sup>4</sup> Consonants render everyday reality, nationality, weight – vowels, the opposite: A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE. Here is a poem exclusively of vowels: о е а / и е и / а е ё (Lawton 1988: 67).

<sup>5</sup> In 1972, it was explained to the author of this article that “е у ю” could, in a personal interpretation, represent the phrase “You have,” *е* being the Slavic verb form “is”, *у* the Russian preposition “by,” marking possession, and *ю* the English “you.” This interpretation thus renders a macaronic phrase based on Russian idiomatic structures: “there is by you”. Dm. N. Nalywayko, Lecture: “Russian Cubo-Futurism,” Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Penna. 12 April 1972.

декламации, то звуки эти будут зависеть от тембра голоса чтеца. Каждый читатель прочтет это “стихотворение” по-своему. Таким образом оно для каждого будет разным. И господин Крученых решительно не может предугадать, как воспримет эти его стихи тот или другой читатель, иначе говоря, автор сам не знает, что именно он написал. Если вы это называете “вселенским языком”, то я не знаю, что же называть “языком во всей вселенной непонятным.” (Brjusov 1914)<sup>6</sup>.

Clearly the symbolist’s poetic universe did not include what he saw as meaningless and untenable randomness.

In the 1960’s individual readings of Kručënyx’s vowel poems lost much of their force when it came to light that both “Heights” and his other vowel poem, the “o e a”, simply redisplayed the dismembered vowels of two common Church Slavonic prayers. Markov noted in his 1967 anthology that the poem “o e a” consisted of the vowels of the opening line of the Lord’s Prayer (*Отче нашъ, иже еси на небесѣхъ* [Markov 1967: 64]) and Kručënyx himself admitted that “Высоты” was composed of the vowels of the first phrases of the Old Church Slavic version of the *Nicene Creed*. As for the genesis of the latter, McVay recounts that in a 1967 Moscow meeting with the Futurist poet, the elderly Kručënyx “observed that the poem *Vysoty (vselenskii iazyk)*... consisting entirely of vowels, is based on the vowels of the ‘Symvol very,’ the Creed” (McVay 1976: 580).

As a consequence of these revelations, speculation about the “meanings” of these two poems has often closely tied one with the other. Consonant with the poet’s own literary manifestos is V.L. Rabinovič’s view that the “o e a” is a playful poem meant to intrigue the reader and provoke an indeterminate emotional response. Curiously, Rabinovič dismisses what he sees as the “change” of the final vowel of the phrase *на*

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<sup>6</sup> *The Futurist* (somewhat inconsistently): So, what if it *is* letters! Isn’t it quite possible to create poetry out of letters? Of course, in the final reckoning, words *are* letters and if poetry is the art of words then it is the art of letters! Here’s an amazing poem by one of the Futurists ... [reads “Heights”]. This poem will say a lot equally to every reader, no matter who he is, educated or uneducated, Russian or Chinese – a poem truly in a universal language!

*The Symbolist*: Please forgive me. Allow me to analyze this poem — by Mr Kruchenykh, if I’m not mistaken. How does it say anything to the reader? If it is through the shape of the letters, then you would agree it is no longer poetry but graphic or pictorial art. If through some secret meaning of the vowels, which you apparently are proposing, then you have to bear in mind that vowels are pronounced differently in every language. A German pronounces “e” differently than a Frenchman, not to mention a Russian; the Italian never pronounces “i” like our “i”, and so forth. If, finally it is the through the sounds, by reading the poem aloud, then the sounds will depend on the peculiarities of the reader’s voice. Every reader will read this “poem” in his own way. Thus, it will be different for each person. And Mr Kručënyx can not positively second guess how one reader or another will take this poem; in other words, the author himself doesn’t know exactly what he has written. If you call this “universal language” then I don’t know what to call “language understood throughout the whole universe.” (English Translation mine – DC).

*небесу* from the letter *u* to *e* as part of the capricious nature of the poet's composition (159). Rabinović's errs here in assuming that Kručėnyx had removed the vowels from the Russian translation of the Lord's Prayer when, clearly, Kručėnyx relied on the *Old Church Slavonic* version of the prayer for his vowels; the final vowel of the poem is the now unused *ятъ* (ѣ), and neither the *естъ* (е) that would replace the *ятъ* in contemporary spelling nor the *уже* (у) of the Russian *Lord's Prayer*. Kručėnyx, in fact, had faithfully reproduced the vowels of the version of the Lord's prayer encountered in the Russian Orthodox liturgical services (*Отче нашъ, уже еси на небесѣхъ*). Bogomolov, on the other hand, faithfully reproduces the *ятъ* of the original text, although without substantive comment (Bogomolov 2005: 8)<sup>7</sup>. Considering the phonological basis of the poem, Janacek points out the spurious nature of any debate over the use of the *естъ* in place of the *ятъ* since each letter represents the same sound [ʲe]. He does note, however, that the *ятъ* may be the clue to "linking the pattern to the *Otche nash* where *yat*' occurs in precisely [this] position." He further raises the question of how the "o e a," because of its culturally marked nature, must necessarily arouse a different reaction in Russian readers than in non-Russian readers, and concludes that "perhaps the fact that this poem, presented as a 'universal language' of vowels was intended to be a joke on Kručėnyx's part" (Janacek 1996: 80). In fact, Janacek's observation is not tangential, especially in light of our discussion below. As we shall show, a close analysis of the how the vowels are intentionally positioned and re-positioned, removed and replaced plays a pivotal role in grasping the significance of Kručėnyx's other vowel poem, "Heights."

As with "o e a," most analyses of "Высоты" rely heavily on the graphic and phonetic features of the poem. One of the more dedicated attempts at finding an underlying structure to "Heights" is Mathauserová's and Romportl's interpretation of the poem in terms of its sound structures. The authors correctly insist that critics should not simply dismiss the artistic value of this poem because the author has indicated its immediate source. In addition, they convincingly point out that one should not take as simple "mistakes" on the part of the author the omission of vowels in the second line of the poem and the "garbled" transmission of the phonemes in the final two lines (Mathauserová, Romportl 1969: 146). Yet the Czech critics dismiss the importance of these aberrations from the source itself a bit too hastily and miss what is a purposeful reworking of phonemes and significant attending plays on meaning<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> We have had access to Bogomolov's article in its on-line edition, which is a reproduction of the print version. Unfortunately, the digital text does not include the page numbers from the original, so page reference numbers are to the on-line edition.

<sup>8</sup> Mathauserová and Romportl give an intriguing, but ultimately unsatisfying analysis of the vowel structures and phonemic "values" in the poem. Moreover, their argument for dismissing the direct importance of the *Creed* in analyzing the poem is based on the questionable conjecture that Kručėnyx somehow simply listened to the *Creed* in a church setting and, taken by the sonorousness of it all, put it down on paper (Mathauserová, Romportl 1969: 145-147).

The uneasy rearrangement of vowels in “Высоты” has compelled some critics to speculate on the wherefores of Kručënyx’s seemingly unfaithful reproduction of the vowels of the *Creed*. Bogomolov, for one, admonishes some critics for seeing only what they wish to see in “Высоты”:

Однако более внимательный анализ показывает, что и сам Крученых, и исследователь несколько подтягивают факты к тому, что им хотелось бы видеть. Марков своей волей добавляет в начало второй строки две гласные — “о е”, чтобы получить более точное соответствие, он же убирает (ставя в квадратные скобки) слова “же всем”, то есть еще две гласные оказываются “пропущенными”. Но дело не только в этом. И Крученых, и Марков не обратили внимания на то обстоятельство (или пренебрегли им), что слово “Верую” по старой орфографии пишется через “ять”, а не через “есть”... Весь этот разговор понадобился нам для утверждения в мысли, что довольно многие внешне совершенно “заумные” стихотворения Крученых обладают неким смыслом, нуждающимся в выявлении. (Bogomolov 2005: 8)<sup>9</sup>.

At this point Bogomolov turns his attention away from the vowel poems and concentrates on the “дыр бул щыл.” Nevertheless, his call for better diagnoses of Kručënyx’s verses and the need to find deeper explanations in many of Kručënyx’s *zaim’* poems is right on target.

However illuminating previous analyses of Kručënyx’s more opaque poems may be, it is quite possible to connect certain accepted “meaning” to some of the poet’s more fractured pieces. This is especially true of those poems that rely on previously established texts for their constituent linguistic parts. Indeed, one need remember that Kručënyx himself pointed to the Futurists’ freedom to make us of partial words:

Живописцы будетяне любят пользоваться частями тел, разрезами, а будетяне речетворцы разрубленными словами, полусловами и их причудливыми хитрыми сочетаниями (заумный язык). Этим достигается наибольшая выразительность, и этим именно отличается язык стремительной современности, уничтожившей прежний, застывший язык. (Markov 1967: 57)<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> A more attentive analysis, however, shows that Kruchenykh himself and the researcher stretch the facts a bit to show what they would like to see. At the beginning of the second line Markov freely adds the two vowels “о е” in order to effect a closer correspondence and sets off the words *же всем* [placing them in square brackets] so that the two vowels appear to be “left out.” But this is not the only thing. Both Kruchenykh and Markov paid no attention to (or ignored) the fact that the word *Верую* in the old orthography is written with the letter *ять* and not the letter *есть*... This entire conversation has been necessary for us to affirm the idea that many of Kruchenykh’s outwardly pure “*zaim*” poems bear some meaning that needs to be uncovered (English translation mine - DC).

<sup>10</sup> The Futurian painters love to use parts of the body, its cross sections, and the Futurian wordwrights use chopped-up words, half-words, and their artful combinations (transrational

This use of partial words did not consequently exclude borrowing partialities from previous works in order to put together new poems. As Loščilov has shown, Kručėnyx's poem "Зев тыф сех" is a compressed version of Vjačeslav Ivanov's "К Зевсу" itself a translation of Terpander's lines "To Zeus." This poetic contraction of an established poem's phonetic fund nicely illustrates how the *žaum'nik* took advantage of rearranged partialities to establish a new work (Loščilov 2008).

We have noted that recent scholarship has described the form of "Heights" and its aberrations from its ultimate source, yet few scholars have attempted to explain Kručėnyx's purpose in choosing the Slavonic *Creed* as his source. Why, indeed, did Kručėnyx, the flag waiver of the nascent Futurist movement, whose major tenets included the dismemberment of language forms, choose to disemvowel the sacred *Credo* of the Orthodox Church and reuse the confiscated letters in a way that begs the reader to "remake" the original? Since it is clear that the Futurist *animus* allowed Kručėnyx to purposefully remake existing texts, it is worthwhile to look more closely at the correspondence between the vowels of "Высоты" and their literary source. In fact such a comparison reveals a hidden – and perhaps playful – correspondence in *meaning* between the vowel poem and the *Вѣрыю*. Here is Kručėnyx's "Heights" laid parallel to the Church Slavonic proclamation of faith:

е у ю	Вѣрую
и а о	во еди́наго
о а	Бога
о а е е н я	Отца, Вседержителя
о а	Творца
е у и е и	небу́ и земли,
и е е	
и и и и е и и	видимымъ же всѣмъ и невидимымъ.

Not surprisingly, the very first vowel presents a challenge: one encounters the Russian letter *e* instead of the anticipated Church Slavic letter *ѣ* (Вѣрыю). Although Bogomolov attributes this letter switch to a certain neglect on Kručėnyx's part, it is possible to speculate on a number of levels as to why the poet might have purposely replaced the Church Slavonic grapheme. As part of his Futurist world-view Kručėnyx openly experimented with and often destroyed the rules of standard orthography, although given his faithful adherence to the *ѣ* in his "о е а" it is not likely that he was rejecting the Church Slavonic spelling out of hand. Indeed, as with the final vowel in "о е а" the phoneme represented here is identical for either spelling. At first glance there does not seem to be any particularly compelling reason for the poet to have switched out the

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language), thus achieving the very greatest expressiveness and precisely this distinguishes the swift language of modernity, which has annihilated the previous frozen language ("The Word as Such" Lawton 1988: 61).

two letters and, although critics have generally passed over the issue of the “ignored *яѣ*,” one need concede the possibility that Kručënyx purposefully switched the *яѣ* to the *еѣ*. From the viewpoint of the history of spelling change in Russia it was certainly possible for Kručënyx to perform such a switch willfully. By 1913 the details of a proposed spelling reform had been thoroughly debated. In 1904 and again 1912 the Sub-commission on Orthographic Reform of the Imperial Academy of Sciences had published its recommendations<sup>11</sup>, which were supported in some literary and publishing circles; in fact, a modest number of books appeared using the proposed variant spelling systems<sup>12</sup>. While the spelling reform was still a novelty when “Heights” appeared, Kručënyx’s letter-swapping was not unique and certainly not out of character for an avid Futurist. Indeed, the idea behind the spelling reform, the overthrow of superfluous features of the past, appealed deeply to the typographic experiments that the Futurists championed: any possibility for revision, mutation or transformation of the written word dovetailed snugly with the Futurists’ view of expressive language.

Aside from simple phonemic and orthographic experimentation or playfulness, though, why else might Kručënyx have replaced the letter? It is likely, we believe, that he was purposefully disguising the source text. While the graphic sequence “*е ѣ ю*” might not have stirred immediate familiarity among the Russian public, the visually more differentiated series “*ѣ ѣ ю*” might well have more readily reminded readers of the *Creed*. Brjusov, in fact, in the parody quoted above, did not recognize the sequence of the printed vowels even though the two variants represent identical phonemic values. Had Kručënyx included both *яѣ*’s as they occur here in the opening of the *Creed*, he might have too easily tipped his hand. While one can posit numerous reasons for the poet’s choice of letters here, it seems most likely that he was intentionally obscuring his source. As we shall show in more detail below, Kručënyx had serious reason to hide the correspondence to the *Символ веры*, or face what surely could have been profound charges of blasphemy against the established Church and therefore against the Imperial government.

The most intriguing disjunction between the vowels of the two works occurs in the second line of the poem where two vowels *o* and *e* appear to be missing. Most interpreters have either glossed over these missing vowels or have interpreted the omission as a mistake. Thus McVay dismisses the aberration after a hasty introduction, (“the opening lines of the poem correspond closely...” [McVay 1976: 580]) while Markov and Janacek make no comment at all. Curiously, Levinton, who insightfully argues for a “quasi-zaum” interpretation of some Futurist poems, also treats the *lacuna* rather lightly:

<sup>11</sup> See Comrie, Stone 1978 for a short history of the proposed reforms.

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive list of books published using revised orthographies, see Панов 1965, especially the addendum: “Тексты, напечатанные с отступлениями от принятой орфографии.”



Они, как известно, представляют собой изолированный вокализм реальных текстов (иногда с пропусками), в обоих случаях — молитв: “Отче наш” в Декларации и “Верую” в “Высотах”<sup>13</sup>.

In contrast, we have found it helpful to apply the philological principle of *lectio difficilior* to our study and consequently to read beyond the text of “Heights” through the medium of its sacred text antecedent. Indeed, the resulting remade text spells out a credo quite different from the Nicene and somewhat ironically indeterminate in its own way. Presenting the text of the *Creed* in correspondence with the vowels as reworked by Kručėnyx shows an illuminating relationship between the vowels and the fully realized words of their source:

Верую  
во еди́наго  
Бога

Верую  
В[о ед]и́наго  
Бога

It is worthwhile here to examine closely the text of the original *Creed* while heeding the metaplasmic changes in the lexical items that result from Kručėnyx’s omission of vowels. In the second line one notes that the full vowel form of the preposition *vo* becomes *въ* while the syllable *ed* of the source text lacks completely. Even a quick glance at the newly rendered text reveals a surprising “meaning” in the renovated lexicon as generated by the aphaeresis: “Верую въ и́наго бо́ра,” that is, “I believe in *another* god”<sup>14</sup>. Although contemporary Russian calls for the stressed ending form *и́ного* in this context, the quotation is based on the Church Slavonic, in which idiom this adjective most often receives a stem stress, the Slavonic adjective *и́нь* expressed here in the masculine singular accusative form. Indeed, both stressed and unstressed forms are encountered well into the twentieth century. Thus, in our re-expansion of Kručėnyx’s text the omission of a vowel and its attendant syllable produces a grammatically sound if doctrinally questionable variation on the theme of Orthodox belief<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> As has been recognized, they represent an isolation of the vowels of actual texts (sometimes with omissions), in both cases of prayers: the *Our Father* (Lord’s Prayer) in the *Declaration* and the *Credo* in “Heights.” (From Levinton, on-line source. English translation mine – DC.)

<sup>14</sup> A cursory search of so-called “full view” books in Russian on-line calls up numerous examples of the phrase *в и́наго/и́ного Бога*, especially from the late imperial era. The prepositional form *во* is predominant, but the form *въ* is also encountered. One example reads “...что церковь великороссійская вѣруеть въ и́наго Бога, антикрита...” (Subbotin 1869: 45). Tseitlin’s *OCS* dictionary defines the adjective *и́нь* thus: 1. *какой-то, некий, некоторый*; 2. *другой*. The secondary definition is obviously the meaning Kručėnyx has in mind.

<sup>15</sup> We do not imply here, of course, that Kručėnyx or the other Futurists were espousing a religious alternative to the Christian Orthodox *Creed*. The matter for them was one of belief in a literary universe. Nonetheless, it would have been inexpedient and even dangerous in the Russia of 1913 for Kručėnyx to use or abuse so blatantly the text of Orthodoxy’s foundational prayer.



Who or what this other god comprises is not specifically stated, but clearly this “other” god is not the God of the Slavic Orthodox *Creed*. In this regard, one must underscore that the word *иной* in the Futurist manifestos is sometimes used to differentiate all previous artistic expression from the Futurists’ art. Kručënyx and Xlebnikov assert, for example, that “У писателей до нас инструментовка была совсем иная, напр.-- По небу полуночи ангел летел / И тихую песню он пел...” and dismiss what they see is the emetic affect of classical poetic language: “Здоровый человек такой пищей лишь расстроит желудок” (Markov 1967: 55)<sup>16</sup>. The two then solidly emphasize the “otherness” of their own poetic method in direct comparison to that of the classical Russian poets by following up immediately with their celebrated poem “дыр бул щыл” as an example of this “other” form (“Мы дали образец *иного* звука и словосочетания”) (Markov 1967: 55).<sup>17</sup> In this way the Futurists declare their autonomy from what they saw as an oppressive belief in an antiquated literature, offering a different belief that finds expression in Kručënyx’s poem.

The vowel text of “Heights” continues for three subsequent lines in tandem with the vowels of the text of the *Creed*, but now recast as the profession of a different allegiance. Equally striking as the first vowel omission is the second divergence from the vowels of the Orthodox *Symbol of Faith*, which occurs in the penultimate line of the poem. Although some critics have tried to explain the vowel order here as the result of the author’s randomizing, it is easy to see that a transposition of the source text’s letters obtains here:

и е е  
и и и и и и

и всѣмъ же  
видимымъ и не видимымъ

We have discussed Kručënyx’s switch of the *ятъ* to the *естъ* above. Here again, we can conjecture that the author’s vowel replacement serves a disguising function as does the transfer of the three vowels “и е[ѣ] е” to a position before the participle *видимымъ*. More importantly, the transposition of three vowels to a line of their own further remakes the text. The hyperbaton of our reconstituted text places a decided emphasis on the phrase *всѣмъ же*, an emphasis which – largely because of the familiarity of the phrase – does not necessarily occur in the source (*видимымъ же всѣмъ и не видимымъ*). Although not as dramatic as in the first two lines of the poem, the lexical switch here carries on the definitive differentiation of allegiances announced in the opening lines. With the pronoun and particle *всѣмъ же* placed *before* the present passive participles *видимымъ* and *невидимымъ*, the transformed text unambiguously applies a belief in the “other” god as

<sup>16</sup> In *Слово как таковое*: “the poets who preceded [them] used a completely different method of orchestration, for ex.– ‘An angel was flying in the midnight sky / softly singing a song...’” (Lawton 1988: 59).

<sup>17</sup> “This kind of food would only give a healthy man an upset stomach” and “We have provided a model for another [*иного*] sort of sound and word combination” (Lawton 1988: 60).

creator of *all* things whether they be visible or invisible. The source text, by contrast, does not necessarily imply that belief in the visible universe requires the same intense affirmation of faith as belief in the invisible. One can compare the emphasis of the phrase “in those things visible and in all things invisible,” with the more emphatic phrasing “and *all* things visible and things invisible.” Moreover, the phrase *всем [же] видимых* is a common enough epithet in modern Russian texts, so that native Russians would hear no discord in the word order *всем же видимых и невидимых*. Indeed, Kručënyx himself connects the word *невидимый* with the desirability of spontaneous utterance in art. Using the Russian mystics’ practice of *glossolalia*, or speaking in tongues, as an example, Kručënyx extols the value of expression unencumbered by any attachment to the lexical canon and underscores the value of linguistic spontaneity in terms similar to those of Russian Orthodox catechesis, “И вот получилось новое слово, которое уже не ложь, а истинное исповедание веры ‘обличение вещей невидимых’” (Markov 1967: 67), that is, “And so a new word was created, which was not a lie, but a genuine testimony of the faith, the “revelation of things unseen.” (Lawton 1988: 72)<sup>18</sup>. Hence, his use of the conservative *Symbol of Faith* as the basis for the “other” creed of the Futurists stands out with its ironic undertones of an opposing belief. Kručënyx’s verse *universalizes* a belief in another – though unnamed and undetermined – god and in *all* those things that that god has created. While the god remains unidentified the manifestation of belief is made clear by the transformation of the vowel text in Kručënyx’s universal vocalic language.

A final consideration underscores Kručënyx’s inclination toward playfulness with language, form and idea. Why in fact did Kručënyx choose this particular source text to confess such a basic message about his artistic beliefs? One rather obvious answer is the foundational importance that the *Creed* has for Russian Orthodox culture and the serious implications that transforming such a text would have. Moreover, the very title of the parodied work (*Символ веры*, “The *Symbol of Faith*”) is obviously and almost painfully ironic, especially considering those whose beliefs Kručënyx sought to overturn. As their nearest antecedents in the Russian literary chronology, the Futurists could not help but take shots at the members of the receding Symbolist movement. While the Symbolists confessed a Solov’ëvian religious belief in the power of the symbol and their own mystically received ability to grasp its meaning, Kručënyx here cleverly, perhaps arrogantly, adopts *the* symbolic text of Russia for his anti-symbolist poem. By radically altering the text while keeping its “essence” – that is, the vowels – the poet could make

<sup>18</sup> And so a new word was created, which was not a lie, but a genuine testimony of the faith, the “revelation of things unseen” (Lawton 1988: 72). Kručënyx uses the phrase again in *Декларация разумного языка* (Markov 1967: 180; Lawton 1988: 183). Markov notes that “‘Обличение вещей невидимых’ – из определения веры в официальном церковном катехизисе” (Markov 1967: 73). Janacek, too, has described the impact that the Russian mystical practice of *glossolalia* had on the Russian literary imagination in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Janacek 1996: 26-31).

a hidden attack on the ultimate Russian Symbol through a subtle if ultimately unkind reference to the Symbolists, whose ascendance the Futurists actively sought to surpass.

Kručenyx found a uniquely artistic way to express those Futurist ideals by dismantling one of his predecessor writers' most sacred texts. By purposefully selecting and then changing the vowels of the Slavonic Orthodox *Creed*, by repositioning, removing and excluding them in a way that begs the reader to look at the source text in a new light, he remakes the referred text into a new, artistically heightened *Credo*. This playing with word parts, while in many respects amusing and ironical, serves the serious hidden purpose of denouncing the forms and beliefs of previous Russian writers – in particular the Symbolists – and states the Futurists' belief in a markedly different literature. Indeed, Kručenyx's "Heights" is a creed in and of itself, a manifesto of "belief" that takes what were considered stale lexical forms, phrases and syntax and renders them into a "universal" language of vowels. As such the new creed expresses the same sentiment as the subtitle of the poet's "New Ways of the Word: the language of the future. Death to Symbolism".

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### Abstract

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"Symbol of Undetermined Faith: A Note on Aleksej Kručënyx's Vowel Poem 'Heights'"

This article looks at Aleksej Kručënyx's poem "Vysoty" (Heights). Consisting entirely of vowels culled from the Church Slavic version of the "Symvol Very" (the eastern *Nicene Creed*) the poem has been traditionally examined as a prime example of the transrational expression (*zraum*) of the Futurist movement. As such, analyses have tended to focus on the phonic and phonemic features of the poem with little attention paid to the relationship between the source text and the poem itself. Thus, "missing" or "transferred" vowels in the poem have often been regarded as mistakes or dismissed as the result of Kručënyx's artistic whim. The paper therefore examines the poem in the context of its Church Slavic antecedent, concentrating on those places where the vowels of the poem diverge from those of the *Creed*. A close analysis of the apparent anomalies between poem and prayer reveals a sophisticated level of word-play that hinges on a complete understanding of the source text and the manipulation of the source vowels. Moreover, our research shows that in the broader context of the antipathy between the Symbolist and Futurist movements, each missing or transposed vowel constitutes a crucial hint for grasping a hidden significance in the poem and for understanding Kručënyx's revamped statement of belief as a playful new literary "creed" that challenges the more "orthodox" literary tenets of the Symbolist poets.